



Egypt

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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The Constitution provides for freedom of belief and the practice of religious rites, although the Government places restrictions on these rights in practice. Islam is the official state religion and Shari'a (Islamic law) is the primary source of legislation; religious practices that conflict with the Government's interpretation of Shari'a are prohibited. Members of non-Muslim religious minorities officially recognized by the Government generally worship without harassment and maintain links with coreligionists in other countries; however, members of religious groups that are not recognized by the Government, particularly the Baha'i Faith, experience personal and collective hardship.

The status of respect for religious freedom by the Government declined during the period covered by this report; there continued to be abuses and numerous restrictions, and some improvements. Despite the passage of constitutional amendments that underscored the principle of equal citizenship rights regardless of religion, several high-profile prosecutions and legal decisions against religious minorities during the reporting period called into question the commitment of the Government to the principle of religious freedom. Some of these cases remained under appeal at the end of the reporting period.

On April 24, 2007, the Court of Administrative Justice ruled that the Interior Ministry was not obligated to recognize conversion to Christianity by Christian-born converts to Islam. The Court ruled that such recognition would violate the prohibition against apostasy under Islamic Shari'a and constitute a "manipulation of Islam and Muslims." This ruling was inconsistent with verdicts issued over the previous 3 years by another judge in the same court on behalf of 32 such converts and maintained a government policy not to provide a legal means for converts from Islam to Christianity to amend their civil records to reflect their new religious status. The previous court rulings had ordered the Interior Ministry to issue amended identification cards to the 32 citizens who sought to reconvert to Christianity.

In May and June 2007, officials of the State Security Intelligence Service (SSIS) arrested members of "the Quranis," who were subsequently charged with "denigrating religions." Sources close to Bahaa al-Accad, a convert from Islam to Christianity who was detained for 25 months without charge, reported SSIS officials threatened his personal security following his April 28, 2007 release. On February 22, 2007, Abdel Karim Nabil Suleiman, whose blog entries had contained strongly worded critiques of the practice of Islam and the Sunni Muslim orthodoxy of the Azhar educational system, was sentenced to 3 years in prison for "denigrating Islam." During the reporting period, SSIS agents reportedly detained a Jehovah's Witness and, while making demeaning comments about the Jehovah's Witnesses, struck the detainee repeatedly and threatened him and his family with ongoing harassment unless he agreed to become an informant on the Witness community.

The Government again opposed advances in the respect for religious freedom affecting Baha'is. A government appeal of an April 2006 decision by the Administrative Court, which had supported the right of Baha'i citizens to receive ID cards and birth certificates with religion noted on the documents, resulted in a December 16, 2006 decision to overturn its ruling, and maintained the government prohibition on Baha'i citizens obtaining identity cards.

In December 2005 the President decreed that permits for church repair and rebuilding, previously requiring his approval, could be granted by provincial governors. The Government announced that the purpose of this was to reduce delay. However, despite the 2005 decree, as well as a previous presidential decree in 1999 to facilitate approvals, many churches continued to encounter the same difficulties in obtaining permits. The central Government continued to control the granting of permits for construction of new churches.

Tradition and some aspects of the law discriminated against religious minorities, including Christians and particularly Baha'is. The Government also continued to deny civil documents, including identity cards, birth certificates, and marriage licenses, to members of the Baha'i community.

[There continued to be religious discrimination and sectarian tension in society](#) during the period covered by this report. On May 11, 2007, a group of Muslim citizens attacked Christians in the village of Bamha. In the ensuing violence, Muslims reportedly set fire to or looted 27 shops and homes of Christians and injured 12 Christians, 1 seriously. The police responded quickly to contain the incident and arrested approximately 60 people. On September 16, 2006 in Awlad Azaz village, Sohag governorate, some minor injuries occurred when Muslim and Christian villagers clashed over land use near the Monastery of Saint Shenouda. An SSIS official reportedly brokered a deal that resulted in the land being equally divided between Christians and Muslims.

The Ambassador, senior administration officials, and members of Congress continued to raise U.S. concerns about religious discrimination with senior government officials. Specifically, the Embassy and other State Department officials raised concerns with the Government about ongoing discrimination faced by Christians in building and maintaining church properties despite Decree 291 of 2005, official discrimination against Baha'is, and the Government's treatment of Muslim citizens who wish to convert to other faiths.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 370,308 square miles and a population of 79 million, of whom almost 90 percent were estimated to be Sunni Muslims. Shi'a Muslims constitute less than 1 percent of the population. Estimates of the percentage of Christians ranged from 8 to 12 percent, or between 6 and 10 million, the majority of whom belonged to the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Other Christian communities include the Armenian Apostolic, Catholic (Armenian, Chaldean, Greek, Melkite, Roman, and Syrian Catholic), Maronite, and Orthodox (Greek and Syrian) churches. An evangelical Protestant community, established in the middle of the 19th century, included 16 Protestant denominations (Presbyterian, Episcopal (Anglican), Baptist, Brethren, Open Brethren, Revival of Holiness (Nahdat al-Qadaasa), Faith (Al-Eyman), Church of God, Christian Model Church (Al-Mithaal al-Masih), Apostolic, Grace (An-Ni'ma), Pentecostal, Apostolic Grace, Church of Christ, Gospel Missionary (Al-Kiraaza bil Ingil), and the Message Church of Holland (Ar-Risaala)). There are also followers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which was granted legal status in the 1960s. There are small numbers of Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, but the Government does not recognize either group. The non-Muslim, non-Coptic Orthodox communities ranged in size from several thousand to hundreds of thousands. The number of Baha'is is estimated at 2,000 persons. The Jewish community numbers fewer than 200 persons.

Christians are dispersed throughout the country, although the percentage of Christians is higher in Upper Egypt (the southern part of the country) and some sections of Cairo and Alexandria.

There are many foreign religious groups, especially Roman Catholics and Protestants who have had a presence in the country for almost a century. These groups engaged in education, social, and development work.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution, under Article 46, provides for freedom of belief and the practice of religious rites; however, the Government restricts on these rights in practice. Islam is the official state religion, and Shari'a is the primary source of legislation; religious practices that conflict with the Government's interpretation of Shari'a are prohibited. Members of the non-Muslim religious minorities generally worship without legal harassment and may maintain links with coreligionists in other countries. Members of other religious groups that are not recognized by the Government, particularly the Baha'i Faith, continue to experience personal and collective hardship.

For a religious group to be officially recognized, it must submit a request to the Religious Affairs Department within the Ministry of Interior, which determines whether the group would, in its view, pose a threat or upset national unity or social peace. The Religious Affairs Department also consults the leading religious figures in the country, particularly the pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church and the sheikh of Al-Azhar. The registration is then referred to the president, who issues a decree recognizing the new group, according to Law 15 of 1927. If a religious group bypasses the official registration process, participants are subject to detention and could also face prosecution and punishment under Article 98(F) of the Penal Code, which forbids the "denigration of religions." The Government last recognized a new religious group in 1990.

All mosques must be licensed. The Government appoints and pays the salaries of the imams who lead prayers in mosques and monitors their sermons. It does not contribute to the funding of Christian churches. The Minister of Awqaf reported that there were 95,000 mosques and small dedicated prayer areas called "zawayas" nationwide as of August 2006. The Government annexes new mosques every year but cannot keep pace with new mosque construction. A 2004

decree from the Minister of Awqaf removed the authority to issue permits to build mosques from governors and placed mosques in private homes under Awqaf administrative control. Approximately 5,000 mosques and zawayas remain unsupervised by the Ministry.

The contemporary interpretation of the 1856 Ottoman Hamayouni decree, partially still in force, requires non-Muslims to obtain a presidential decree to build new churches and synagogues. In addition, Ministry of Interior regulations, issued in 1934 under the Al-Ezabi decree, specify a set of 10 conditions that the Government must consider before a presidential decree for construction of a new non-Muslim place of worship can be issued. The conditions include the requirement that the distance between a church and a mosque be not less than 100 meters and that the approval of the neighboring Muslim community be obtained.

On March 27, 2007, in a referendum that independent observers stated was marred by low turnout, voters approved 34 constitutional amendments, including at least 2 with unclear implications for religious freedom. The amended Article One of the Constitution states that the country's political system is based on the principle of citizenship. The amended Article Five now prohibits the formation of parties and/or the conduct of political activities on a religious basis. Government supporters argued that these changes would separate religion from politics. Some critics argued, however, that the amendments are incompatible with Article Two, which continues to state that Shari'a is the basis for legislation.

There was controversy over the role of women in Islam after national newspapers quoted a fatwa by the country's Grand Mufti, Sheikh Ali Gomaa, declaring a woman unfit to be head of state because she would have to lead prayer, a role reserved for men. After considerable media coverage, the Mufti issued a clarification on February 2, 2007 claiming that he was only referring to the "traditional role of Caliph as both secular head of state and imam of the Muslims," and not to the contemporary era.

Additionally, as part of an apparent government policy seeking to control public gatherings, the Ministry of Awqaf presented a bill to Parliament in October banning political gatherings and demonstrations inside mosques. The new draft law, which is still pending in Parliament, stipulates a 3-month imprisonment and \$80 fine (LE 500) for anyone convicted of such offenses.

During the year Jehovah's Witnesses continued to engage the Government on their request to be granted legal registration, but no progress was achieved. Representatives from the Jehovah's Witnesses' New York headquarters, accompanied by European colleagues, visited the National Council for Human Rights, the Arab League, and others. SSIS agents detained, physically abused, and attempted to recruit as informer a Witness during the reporting period. In 2005 Jehovah's Witnesses reported that one of their members was similarly detained and assaulted by SSIS agents (See Abuses section). Jehovah's Witnesses have been banned in the country and faced varying degrees of harassment and surveillance by government agents since 1960, despite a presence dating to the 1930s and legal registration in Cairo in 1951 and Alexandria in 1956. The Government attributes its refusal to grant the Jehovah's Witnesses registration to the opposition of the Coptic Orthodox Church, which has condemned the Jehovah's Witnesses as heretical, as well as to its lingering Nasser-era suspicion of links between Witnesses and the State of Israel. A 1964 Arab League decree labeled the Jehovah's Witnesses as Zionists.

The quasi-governmental National Council for Human Rights (NCHR) is charged with furthering protections, raising awareness, and ensuring the observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including religious freedom. It is also charged with monitoring enforcement and application of international agreements. Five of its 25 reappointed members, as well as its president, are Copts.

In the NCHR's third report, issued in January 2007, the Citizenship Committee recommended changes in law and practice designed to ease sectarian tension, such as the passage of a unified law governing construction and repair of places of worship. The NCHR also called for spreading a culture of pluralism and tolerance, propagating respect for other religious groups through the media and religious institutions, and solving Christian grievances locally without giving cause for foreign intervention. The Citizenship Committee reported that the NCHR received 32 complaints of missing young Coptic women during the 9-month period from March to December 2006. The NCHR referred these complaints to the Interior Ministry which, in most cases, replied that the women had eloped with Muslim men, converted to Islam of their free will, and had chosen to leave their families without prior notice because they feared reprisal on the part of their families. The NCHR also recommended training security officers to handle disputes arising from sectarian conflicts and emergencies. The report called for the removal of all the impediments that restrict the participation of Christians and women from politics and for the encouragement of young men and women to play a part in decision-making moving towards political reformation. The report stated that the NCHR had received a total of 57 formal complaints pertaining to religious freedom, which it sent to relevant authorities for action. The NCHR reported it received replies from government ministries and other bodies regarding 36 of the complaints.

In addition to complaints by Christian citizens to the NCHR, there were also 14 complaints from Baha'is, one of which was signed by 51 complainants who sought the right to have their religion listed on official papers. The report indicated that the

NCHR discussed Baha'i concerns with the Ministry of Interior with a view to resolving the issue to the satisfaction of all parties. The NCHR submitted a request to the Prime Minister on December 26, 2006 seeking the removal of the religion field from the government-issued identification cards, but the religion field remained a mandatory section on them at the end of the reporting period.

The NCHR report noted one complaint received from a Jehovah's Witness, Michael Geyad Kamel Girguis, who had obtained a Bachelor of Science degree in medicine with highest honors and excellent grades and who believed he should have been appointed as a doctor at the Ain Shams University Hospital. Girguis learned from the technical affairs office of the hospital that he had been denied the job by the security office at the Ministry of Higher Education because of his affiliation with Jehovah's Witnesses. The NCHR report noted that the Council is pursuing the Girguis case with the Ministry of Higher Education.

The following holy days are designated national holidays: Eid Al-Fitr, Eid Al-Adha, the Islamic New Year, the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, and Coptic Christmas (January 7).

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The approval process for church construction continued to be hindered by lengthy delays often measured in years. Although government officials maintain that President Mubarak approves all requests for permits presented to him, independent critics charge that delays by the Interior Ministry and/or local authorities cause many requests to reach the President slowly or not at all. Some churches have complained that local security officials have blocked church repairs or improvements even when a permit has been issued. Others suggest unequal enforcement of the regulations pertaining to church and mosque projects. Many churches face difficulty in obtaining permits from provincial officials.

According to statistics published in the Government's Official Gazette, 21 presidential decrees were issued from July 1, 2006, through June 30, 2007, for church-related construction, comprising 20 permits functioning to legalize existing unlicensed churches and 1 for a completely new facility; renovation/repair is handled now at the governorate level, per decree 291 of 2005.

In 2005 President Mubarak issued Decree 291/2005, which delegated authority to the country's 26 governors to grant permits to Christian denominations that seek to expand or rebuild existing churches. The decree also stated that churches could undertake basic repairs and maintenance subject only to the provision of written notification to the local authorities. Decree 291 noted that the governors must examine all applications for rebuilding or expansion, which must be supported by unspecified supporting documents, within thirty days of submission. According to the new decree, "permits may not be refused except with a justified ruling." Decree 291 also cancelled a 1999 decree aimed at improving the permit process for church repair. (Presidential Decree 453 of 1999 had made the repair of all places of worship subject to a 1976 civil construction code. Although this decree made mosque and church repairs technically subject to the same laws, authorities enforced the laws more strictly for churches than for mosques.)

A year and half after promulgation of Decree 291/2005, church and lay leaders have complained that the permit process remains susceptible to delay by local officials. They have further charged that some local authorities refused to process applications without certain "supporting documents" that were virtually impossible to obtain (e.g., a presidential decree authorizing the existence of a church that had been established during the country's monarchical era). Others complain that some local authorities categorize routine repairs and maintenance (e.g., painting of walls and plumbing repairs) as expansion/reconstruction projects, thus requiring formal permits versus simple notification. They also maintain that security forces blocked them from using permits that had been issued, and at times denied them permits, for repairs to church buildings and the supply of water and electricity to existing church facilities. Incidents of blocked or delayed permits varied, often depending on the attitude of local security officials and the governorate leadership toward the church and on their personal relationships with representatives of the Christian churches. As a result, congregations have experienced lengthy delays--lasting for years in many cases--while waiting for new church building permits.

On October 15, 2006, *Watani* newspaper published an interview with General Nabil Al Ezaby, the Governor of Assuit, who asserted that not less than 120 churches had received reconstruction permits in the past 6 months. Subsequently, the *Watani* reporter learned from the governor's office that 58 churches had received repair permits, but when pressed for details the governor's office was only able to provide a list of 16 churches.

At the unlicensed Evangelical Church in Maadi, a suburb of Cairo, police reportedly halted a reconstruction project in 2004 and prevented church members from entering the church. Work on the church remained suspended during the reporting period. For 50 years the church has been unable to obtain a license.

The Assiut bishopric has been waiting a decade for local officials to issue a building permit for a new church in the governorate's Arbaeen District, despite a 1997 order from the President and approval from the Ministry of Interior to issue

the decree. Assiut's El Hamra District and Burg al Arab, Alexandria Governorate, have been waiting since 1997 and 1988, respectively. The Brothers denomination, also in Assiut Governorate, received a permit to build a church in 2001, but local police stopped construction of the building's foundation.

After 18 years St. George Church in Dafesh, a majority Christian community near Assiut, Upper Egypt, obtained approval from the local governor in 2000 to build a new church to replace the original building, which had become too small to accommodate the growing community. Shortly after construction began in 2000 the new site was vandalized. The Government halted construction, ostensibly because the church had only obtained local approval and not the presidential decree required to build a new church. Construction remained halted at the end of the period covered by this report. The congregation continued to worship at the older site.

In 1999 the governor of Assiut issued a decree to St. John the Baptist Church at Awlad Elias in Sadfa, near Assiut, stating that the Orthodox church was given a license to effect several remodeling projects and restoration projects. In 2001, however, Sadfa police halted repairs because authorities believed that the church would enlarge its size by extending the building into the churchyard. After negotiations with SSIS, the church received permission to demolish a wall to extend its size. However, after the newspaper *Watani* published an article exposing this issue and the outcome, SSIS officials halted construction a second time. As of the end of the reporting period, construction had not resumed, and the church was still waiting for the Ministry of Interior to permit resumption of repairs. The congregation was forced to erect a tent in the small church courtyard to conduct prayers.

Despite governorate level approval in 2001 for restorations to the Mar Guirguis Church in Sahel Salim, Assiut, local authorities blocked work on the church under a variety of pretexts until a presidential decree in June 2005 paved the way for the complete rebuilding of the church, which subsequently occurred.

In Ezbet al-Nakhl, East Cairo, Coptic leaders of the Church of the Archangel Mikhail received permission from the Ministry of Interior in 1996, ratified by the Governor of Cairo in 2001, to expand the church to accommodate its growing congregation. However, local authorities in the district of al-Marg refused to accept the request to expand the church without a presidential decree, which was required for the renovation. The church, which had originally sought a presidential decree in 1987, had not been able to obtain one, and the project remained frozen at the end of the period covered by this report. Government officials asserted that the project was frozen because church officials did not employ the proper procedures while seeking a presidential decree, therefore making it illegal to renovate the church.

Local authorities have also closed down unlicensed buildings used as places of worship. As a result of restrictions, some communities use private buildings and apartments for religious services or build without permits. In 2005 SSIS officials threatened to demolish the Apostolic Church in Abowan, Minya, which has operated without a government permit since 1984, on the grounds that it was structurally unsound. Nonetheless, the church continued to operate during the reporting period.

In January 2006 there were sectarian clashes in the settlement of Udayssat, near Luxor, after Christians conducted Epiphany services in a building that had intermittently served as an unlicensed church since 1971. Several hundred Muslim residents of the area surrounded the building, vandalized the property, and attempted to set it ablaze. In the ensuing melee, approximately a dozen persons, both Christian and Muslim, were injured, along with several policemen. Assaults killed a 47-year-old Christian farmer from the settlement, Kamal Shaker Megalaa, as he returned from his fields. The Luxor district attorney ordered the arrest and investigation of several Muslims from Udayssat on suspicion of involvement in his killing; all were released without charges in May 2007.

Hala Helmy Boutros, a Christian activist and blogger based in Qena Governorate, reported that the authorities in Qena ordered her to suspend her blog, Aqbat Bela Hudood (Copts Without Borders), which discussed complaints of persecution by the Coptic minority. (Boutros wrote under the pseudonym of Hala El-Masry.) Boutros had accused the authorities of complicity in the sectarian violence against Copts in January 2006 in the village of Udayssat. Boutros had attempted to travel to the United States in June 2006 to attend a conference on Coptic Christian issues, but authorities at Cairo International Airport prevented her from leaving the country. After a June 25, 2006 court hearing, at which Boutros was ordered to pay bail of \$526 (LE 3,000), she was released. The case against Boutros, who was charged with "spreading false news and disrupting social harmony between Christians and Muslims," remained pending at the end of the reporting period. Boutros remained the target of a judicial investigation and is prohibited from leaving the country.

In 2005 the Administrative Judiciary Court in Alexandria annulled a decree issued by the Minister of Information that had banned veiled anchorwomen in television programs. The court established that the Ministry of Information's decree violated Article 47 of the Constitution, which provides for freedom of religion. State-run television refused to comply with the 2005 judicial ruling, and in March 2007 the court told anchorwomen Hala El-Malki and Ghada El-Tawil that it had already dealt with the case and could do nothing to enforce its ruling. In April, 2007 Malki and Tawil stated they would seek to appeal. Their case remained unresolved at the end of the reporting period. On June 21, 2007 however, Hala Al-Malki anchored a program on national state television while wearing a head-scarf (hijab). Hany Ghafar, the executive in charge,

stated that it was Malki's decision to wear the hijab.

The Government outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), which operates missionary, charity, and political activities, in 1954 but has tolerated its operations with varying levels of interference. Muslim Brothers speak openly and publicly about their views and have identified themselves publicly during the reporting period as members of the organization, although they remain subject to arbitrary treatment and pressure from the Government. During the period covered by this report, hundreds of MB members were arrested and charged with membership in an illegal organization, planning to revive the activities of the banned group, possessing antigovernment leaflets, obstructing the Constitution and the law, and organizing demonstrations without obtaining prior security permission. Authorities prevented several other MB members from traveling abroad. After a militia-style demonstration and parade by mask-wearing MB students at Al-Azhar University on December 14, 2006 the Government arrested scores of MB activists, including their third-ranking official, Khairat Al-Shatir. In January 2007 the Government announced plans to try Shatir and 39 other MB members before military tribunals. Despite two separate court rulings ordering the release of Shatir and his coaccused, the Government commenced the military tribunal at Haykstep military base, near Cairo, on April 26, 2007 but immediately adjourned the trial. Shatir and dozens of other MB members remained in detention, awaiting resumption of their trial, at the end of the reporting period.

Eighty-eight independent members of Parliament associated with the Muslim Brotherhood served in the People's Assembly during the reporting period. On April 29, 2007, security forces arrested two MB members of Parliament in Menoufiya, ignoring their parliamentary immunity, but released them after 24 hours.

On June 11, 2007, candidates contested 88 seats in national elections for the Shura Council, the higher legislative body. Independent candidates affiliated with the MB unsuccessfully contested 19 of the seats. Security forces arrested scores of MB activists in the lead up to those elections. Despite Article 5 of the Constitution, which bans any political activity based on religion, some MB-affiliated candidates ran openly under the slogan "Islam is the solution" and displayed MB insignia on their campaign materials. They argued that Article Two of the Constitution, which states that Shari'a is the basis of legislation, allowed such activity.

The Government generally tolerated foreign religious groups if they did not proselytize. However, the Government over the past several years, including during the reporting period, refused reentry into the country of several individuals suspected of proselytizing.

In contrast to previous years, there were no reports of authors facing trial or charges related to writings or statements considered heretical during the reporting period.

Various ministries are legally authorized to ban or confiscate books and works of art upon obtaining a court order. The Council of Ministers may order the banning of works that it deems offensive to public morals, detrimental to religion, or likely to cause a breach of the peace. The Islamic Research Center (IRC) at Al-Azhar University has legal authority to censor and, since 2004, confiscate, any publications dealing with the Qur'an and the authoritative Islamic traditions (Hadith). In recent years, the IRC has passed judgment on the suitability of nonreligious books and artistic productions, and there were several new cases of confiscation during the period covered by this report. Al-Azhar has the legal right to recommend confiscation, but the actual act of confiscation requires a court order.

In 2003 the Ministry of Justice issued a decree authorizing Al-Azhar sheikhs to confiscate publications, tapes, speeches, and artistic materials deemed inconsistent with Islamic law. There were no court-ordered book confiscations during the year, but the Government permitted greater confiscatory authority to Al-Azhar University and acted on its recommendations.

After Islamic thinker Mohamed Emara published a book in late 2006 that generated accusations of anti-Christian bias, the Ministry of Islamic Endowments withdrew the first edition of the book from the market and republished it without the offending sections. Entitled *The Sedition of Takfir (labeling one's opponents as apostates): Concerning Shias, Wahabis, and Sunnis*, the book was distributed by the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs, affiliated with the Ministry of Islamic Endowments (number 142 of the monthly series *Islamic Issues*), and sold at the subsidized price of 17 US cents (LE 1). The first edition of the book reportedly repeated a medieval denunciation of Christians as apostates from Islam who could legitimately be killed and have their wealth confiscated. The main topic of the book was a refutation of takfir, with the author denouncing the practice of an Islamic sect declaring other sects infidels or apostates. The first edition book sold out in one day. Emara later issued a statement of apology and clarification that he sent to all newspapers insisting that he had inadvertently quoted the line "Christians and Jews may legitimately be killed and their money confiscated" from the medieval scholar El-Ghazali. A new edition is now on the market.

On January 29, 2007, *Al-Fagr* newspaper reported that a new book, entitled *Studies of Sects (Dirasaat fi-al-Firak)*, by Abdel Kader El-Bahrawy, a philosophy professor at Benha University, was offensive to Copts because it claimed they harbored a "grudge" against Muslims. Bahrawy's book was part of the required philosophy curriculum for Benha University

students. After learning of the controversy, Bahrawy apologized, removed the book from the syllabus, and halted further publication.

On September 24, 2006, Information Minister Anas al-Fiqi issued a decree banning the distribution of editions of some Western newspapers for containing articles offending Islam and the Prophet Mohammed. The Minister stated that the ban applied to issue 19324 of the French daily *Le Figaro*, issue 216 of the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, and issue 14 of the British *Guardian Weekly* for containing articles that "denigrated Islam," in that they claimed that Islam was spread by the sword and described its prophet as a messenger of evil, a polygamist, and a killer of Jews.

On October 17, 2006, authorities banned a book that criticized the rising influence of a new generation of "televangelists" who advocate the Islamization of society. Al-Azhar's Islamic Research Center confiscated copies of Mohammed Fattuh's book *Modern Sheikhs and the Industry of Religious Extremism*. Also in October, Al-Azhar banned a book "Daily Life in the Medieval Islamic World," by James E. Lindsay, on the grounds that it contained information not in accordance with the principles of Islam. There was no evidence of any effort to confiscate the book.

In a February 2007 workshop on "Freedom of thought and expression in the cultural field", organized by the Cairo Center for Human Rights, intellectuals, and civil society and human rights activists called for respect of the 'other,' avoiding the exploitation of religious differences to inflame sectarian conflict, and fostering civilization and cultural dialogue. The Secretary-General of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, Hafez Abu Saeda, criticized the practice of book banning and confiscation, describing it as a flagrant violation of freedom of expression. He asserted that more than 80 books had been confiscated by the security authorities in coordination with Al-Azhar during the reporting period. The confiscated books, education specialist Kamal Moghieth charged, did not address religion per se, but discussed religio-political conflicts in Saudi Arabia.

In January 2007 the authorities at the Cairo International Book Fair prohibited the display of five books by noted feminist Nawal Al-Sadawi on the grounds that her books insulted the monotheistic religious groups, including Islam, and engaged in blasphemy. Islamic Research Center officials asserted that Al-Sadawi's play, *God Submits his Resignation at the Summit*, constituted extreme disrespect for Islam. (In 2000, Sadawi and her husband successfully fought an extended legal battle against Islamist lawyer Nabih Al-Wahsh who had sued to have Sadawi divorced from her husband on the grounds that she was an atheist.)

The local media, including state television and newspapers, give prominence to Islamic programming. Christian television programs are aired weekly on state-owned Nile Cultural TV. The weekly religion page of the prominent daily *al-Ahram* often reports on conversions to Islam and states that converts improved their lives and found peace and moral stability.

Most press organizations include one or more journalists covering the so-called Coptic file, responsible for following news that pertains to the Church and covering sectarian issues and events.

On March 19, 2007, the independent newspaper *Al-Masry Al-Youm* reported that Sheikh Youssef Al-Badry, a member of the Higher Council for Islamic Affairs, asked the public prosecutor to open a case against Adel Hamouda, editor in chief of *Al-Fagr* newspaper, and Mohamed Al-Baz, a reporter at the same newspaper, for humiliating the Imam of Al-Azhar (and by extension all Muslims) by depicting him in a doctored photograph on the front page of *Al-Fagr* on March 17, 2007, clothed in Papal garb and holding a cross, under the headline "Don't visit the Pope who insulted the prophet, Grand Imam of the Vatican."

Coptic activists complained that a government-funded website, belonging to the Egyptian Islamic Council, contained an article entitled "Islam vs. Jews and Christians (Ahl al-Kitab): Past and Present" by Dr. Maryam Jameelah which asserted that Muslims should not make "peace with [Jews and Christians] until we can humble them and gain the upper hand."

Coptic activists also complained that *El-Megahed*, an Islamic-themed magazine published by the Department of Officers Morale within the army, devoted a portion of its July/August 2006 issue to an article that criticized Christians as infidels.

Pope Shenouda III has banned Coptic travel to Jerusalem since the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty of 1979. However, press reports, citing Israeli Interior Ministry statistics, indicated that an estimated 735 Copts visited Israel in 2004 for pilgrimage. There were no statistics available for subsequent periods. According to *Al-Ahram* on September 4, 2006, Pope Shenouda III forbade Copts to go to Jerusalem and stated that anyone who visits Jerusalem while it is still under the Israeli occupation would be subject to "ecclesiastical punishment," including the deprivation of communion. In a March 2007 meeting with the Lions Club of Cairo, Pope Shenouda III asserted, however, that he does not oppose the travel of Copts to Israel for business, study, or pilgrimage.

On April 21, 2007, the Supreme Administrative Court banned Gamal Amgad Michael, a Christian citizen, from visiting

Jerusalem. The court upheld the minister of interior's decree banning citizens from visiting holy sites in Israel. The court based its verdict on the Government's responsibility to protect its citizens, including by banning them from visiting countries where acts of violence and killing occur. The court also, however, acknowledged the existence of a legislation "vacuum" and called on the Government to issue new laws/regulations governing travel to disputed or dangerous countries.

The Government has not granted formal legal recognition to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), or Mormons, in Cairo. The LDS Church has maintained an organized congregation in the country for more than 30 years. The Government has raised no objection. Some members, particularly those who have converted to the LDS Church overseas and then returned to the country, complain of excessive surveillance from State Security and sometimes avoid meetings from fear of harassment.

The Constitution provides for equal public rights and duties without discrimination based on religion or creed, and, in general, the Government upholds these constitutional protections; however, government discrimination against non-Muslims exists. There are no Christians serving as presidents or deans of public universities, and they are rarely nominated by the Government to run in elections as National Democratic Party (NDP) candidates. For the first time in more than 30 years, a Copt was appointed in 2006 as one of the country's 26 governors, in Qena. As of June 30, 2007, there were 6 Christians (5 appointed, 1 elected) in the 454-seat People's Assembly; 6 Christians (all appointed) in the 264-seat Shura Council; and 2 Christians in the 32-member cabinet.

Christians, who represented between 8 and 12 percent of the population, hold less than 2 percent of the seats in the People's Assembly and Shura Council.

Government practices discriminated against Christians in hiring for the public sector, staff appointments to public universities, and in barring them from study at Al-Azhar University (a publicly funded institution). Public funds pay Muslim imams but not Christian clergy. There are few Christians in the upper ranks of the security services and armed forces. In general, public university training programs for Arabic language teachers bar non-Muslims because the curriculum involves study of the Qur'an.

In January 2007 Muslim students at Ein Shams University accused a Christian lecturer, Ghada Adel Youssef, on the faculty of Specialized Education (Music Department), of discrimination against Muslim students. The university responded by terminating the Christian teacher's appointment and replacing her with a Muslim. The dismissed Christian teacher alleged that her credentials were superior to those of her replacement and filed discrimination complaints against the university.

According to media reports in March 2007, officials at the Al-Ayat Government Industrial Secondary School in Giza governorate attempted to require all female students, including Christians, to wear Islamic headscarves (hijab). The Ministry of Education responded quickly, noting that forcing anyone to wear the hijab is a violation of law. Minister of Education Yusri al-Gamal categorically denied rumors that the Ministry sought to require female students to wear headscarves and added that the Ministry bans wearing the hijab in primary schools and allows it only in preparatory and secondary schools upon written request from a girl's parent.

In January 2007, continuing a practice that resumed in 2005 and 2006, Jewish pilgrims (mostly visiting from Israel) celebrated the Abu Hasira festival. In 2004 the Supreme Administrative Court upheld a lower court's 2001 decision to ban the annual festival at the tomb of Rabbi Abu Hasira in a village in the Nile Delta and rejected the Ministry of Culture's designation of the site as a protected antiquity. The 2001 decision linked the status of the site and the festival to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the celebration was not held during the period 2002-2004.

The application of family law, including marriage, divorce, alimony, child custody, and burial, is based on an individual's religion. In the practice of family law, the Government recognizes only the three "heavenly religions," Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Muslim families are subject to Shari'a, Christian families to canon law, and Jewish families to Jewish law. In cases of family law disputes involving a marriage between a Christian woman and a Muslim man, the courts apply Shari'a. The Government does not recognize the marriages of citizens adhering to religions other than Christianity, Judaism, or Islam.

Under Shari'a as practiced in the country, non-Muslim males must convert to Islam to marry Muslim women, but non-Muslim women need not convert to marry Muslim men. Muslim women are prohibited from marrying Christian men.

Inheritance laws for all citizens are based on the Government's interpretation of Shari'a. Muslim female heirs receive half the amount of a male heir's inheritance. Christian widows of Muslims have no automatic inheritance rights but may be provided for in testamentary documents.

Under Shari'a, converts from Islam lose all rights of inheritance. However, because the Government offers no legal means for converts from Islam to Christianity to amend their civil records to reflect their new religious status, inheritance rights may appear not to have been lost.

The law provides for khul' divorce, which allows a Muslim woman to obtain a divorce without her husband's consent, provided that she is willing to forego all of her financial rights, including alimony, dowry, and other benefits. In practice some judges have applied the law in such a manner as to cause lengthy bureaucratic delays for the thousands of women who have filed for khul' divorce. Many women have complained that after being granted khul', the required child alimony is not paid.

The Coptic Orthodox Church excommunicates female members who marry Muslim men and requires that other Christians convert to Coptic Orthodoxy to marry a member of the church. Coptic males are prevented from marrying Muslim women by both civil and religious laws. A civil marriage abroad is an option should a Christian male and a Muslim female citizen decide to marry; however, their marriage would not be legally recognized in the country. Additionally, the woman could be arrested and charged with apostasy, and any children from such a marriage could be taken and assigned to the physical custody of a male Muslim guardian, as determined by the Government's interpretation of Shari'a. The Coptic Orthodox Church permits divorce only in specific circumstances, such as adultery or conversion of one spouse to another religion.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The Government continued to deny civil documents, including ID cards, birth certificates, and marriage licenses, to members of the Baha'i community. On December 16, 2006, the Supreme Administrative Court overturned a lower court ruling, deciding that Baha'is may not list their religion in the mandatory religion "field" on obligatory government identity cards. In May 2006 the Ministry of Interior had appealed an administrative court ruling issued in April 2006, which supported the right of Baha'i citizens to receive ID cards and birth certificates with the Baha'i religion noted on the documents. The Government insists that religious identification on national identity cards is necessary to determine which laws apply in civil cases. The Government indicated that all citizens must be in possession of new computerized identification cards by January 1, 2007 and that old, hand-written cards would no longer be valid. However, in May 2007 the Government announced that this requirement had been postponed. The Government has issued passports for Baha'i citizens and has stated that it extended the deadline for the use of the old identity cards as a temporary measure until January 2008. (National passports do not indicate the holder's religion.) Citizens not in possession of valid identity documents may be subject to detention.

Al-Azhar's Islamic Research Center issued a legal opinion in December 2003 condemning Baha'is as apostates. In May 2006 the Minister of Justice requested guidance from the IRC in preparation for the Government's appeal against the landmark April 4, 2006 case in support of Baha'i rights. The IRC issued an Islamic legal interpretation stating that the Baha'i Faith was a "heresy." The 2006 interpretation referenced a 1985 opinion that had accused Baha'is of working in support of Zionism and imperialism and labeled them as "apostates."

Law 263 of 1960, still in force, bans Baha'i institutions and community activities and strips Baha'is of legal recognition. During the Nasser era, the Government confiscated all Baha'i community properties, including Baha'i centers, libraries, and cemeteries. The Government has asserted that national identity cards require all citizens to be categorized as Muslims, Christians, or Jews. The Ministry of Interior has reportedly, on rare occasions, issued documents that list a citizen's religion as "other" or simply do not mention religion. But it is not clear when these conditions apply. Baha'is and other religious groups that are not associated with any of the three "heavenly religions" have been compelled either to misrepresent themselves or go without valid identity documents.

Those without valid identity cards encounter difficulty registering their children in school, opening bank accounts, and establishing businesses. Baha'is at age 16 face additional problems under Law 143/1994, which makes it mandatory for all citizens to obtain a new identification card featuring a new national identification number. Police occasionally conduct random inspections of identity papers and those found without identity cards can be detained until the document is provided to the police. Some Baha'is without identity cards reportedly stay home to avoid police scrutiny and possible arrest.

In May 2004 the Government confiscated the identity cards of two Baha'is who were applying for passports. Officials told them that they were acting on instructions from the MOI to confiscate any identity cards belonging to Baha'is.

Some elements of the press published articles critical of the Baha'is. For example, on October 16, 2006, *Roz Al-Youssef*, a pro-government newspaper, published excerpts of a government advisory report, which supported the MOI's petition to overturn the April 4, 2006 ruling. The report argued that because the Baha'i Faith was not recognized in the country as a "divine religion," its followers were not entitled to citizenship rights. The report argued that constitutional guarantees of freedom of belief and religion do not apply to the Baha'is and that the country is not bound under its commitment as a

cosignatory to the **U.N. Universal Declaration on Human Rights**. The report also asserted that Baha'is are apostates, a threat to public order, and recommended that "methods must be defined that would insure that Baha'is are identified, confronted, and singled out so that they could be watched carefully, isolated and monitored in order to protect the rest of the population as well as Islam from their danger, influence, and teachings."

On May 29, 2007, SSIS agents arrested three men affiliated with the Qurani movement, a small group of Muslims who rely largely if not exclusively on the Qur'an as authoritative for Islam, to the exclusion of the prophetic traditions (hadith) and other sources of Islamic law. On May 31 and June 17, 2007, they arrested two additional Quranis. According to a lawyer with the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, a respected Cairo-based advocacy group who attended some of the police interrogations of the Quranis, interrogation of the detainees was confined to their religious views. One detainee told EIPR and the investigating prosecutor that he had been beaten and threatened with rape by a previous SSIS investigator. The five Quranis remained in detention without charge at the end of the reporting period.

On March 12, 2007, the Alexandria Court of Appeal upheld the conviction of 22-year old student blogger Abdel Karim Nabil Suleiman. On February 22, 2007, the Alexandria Criminal Court convicted him of "denigrating" Islam and insulting President Mubarak through his blog entries and sentenced him to 4 years in prison (3 for denigrating Islam and 1 for insulting the President). On November 6, 2006, Alexandria security forces arrested Abdel Karim, whose blog entries had contained strongly worded critiques of the practice of Islam and Al-Azhar's Sunni Muslim orthodoxy. Abdel Karim had previously been detained on account of his writings for 18 days in October 2005. He had been expelled and reported to the authorities by Al-Azhar University for criticizing Islamic authority. At the end of the reporting period, his lawyers were preparing to appeal the decision to the Court of Cassation, the country's highest appeals court.

During the reporting period, SSIS agents reportedly detained a Jehovah's Witness and, during an interrogation in which security officials made demeaning comments about the Jehovah's Witnesses, struck the detainee repeatedly and threatened him and his family with ongoing harassment unless he agreed to become an informant on the Witness community. While Witnesses have reported varying degrees of harassment and surveillance by government agents since 1960, senior international Witness leadership believed that their engagement of the Government over the past 2 years concerning their request for official recognition had resulted in a cessation of the policy of harassment and hostile surveillance.

The Government at times prosecutes members of religious groups whose practices are deemed to deviate from mainstream Islamic beliefs and whose activities are alleged to jeopardize communal harmony. [Shi'ite Muslim](#) Mohamed Ramadan Hussein El-Derini, arrested in 2004 apparently due to his affiliation with Shi'a Islam, was released in June 2005, after having spent 15 months in administrative detention without charge or trial. There were credible reports that members of the SSIS repeatedly tortured and mistreated Derini while he was in custody.

The Government continued to try citizens for unorthodox religious beliefs. In 2005 the Maadi misdemeanor court issued a verdict in a blasphemy case involving Ibrahim Ahmad Abu Shusha and 11 of his followers, who had been detained absent an arrest warrant since 2004. The court sentenced Abu Shusha to 3 years' imprisonment for claiming to be divine and denigrating Islam. The court sentenced the 11 other defendants (including 3 women, 2 of whom are Abu Shusha's wives) to 1 year of imprisonment and ordered the confiscation of the leaflets and writings that propagated the group's ideology. In its reasoning, the court stated that there was sufficient evidence that Abu Shusha embraced beliefs that are contrary to and derogatory of Islam and that he tried to propagate those beliefs by attempting to show that he possessed divine powers. The court also asserted that freedom of belief does not include permission to deny the principles of heavenly religions. An appeals court reaffirmed the Abu Shusha sentences in July 2005. At the end of the reporting period, Abu Shusha's lawyers were seeking to appeal his case to the Court of Cassation. His case remained pending at the end of the reporting period.

In May 2003 the SSIS arrested Metwalli Ibrahim Metwalli Saleh, apparently because of his views on Islam. After eight separate rulings from the Supreme State Security Emergency Court ordering his release, Saleh, who had been in detention in Al-Wadi al-Gadid Prison, near Assiut, was released in April 2006.

Neither the Constitution nor the Civil and Penal Codes prohibit proselytizing, but police have harassed those accused of proselytizing on charges of ridiculing or insulting heavenly religions or inciting sectarian strife.

While there are no legal restrictions on the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam, there were occasional reports that police persecuted converts from Islam to Christianity. In April 2005 the SSIS detained Bahaa Al-Accad, a citizen who was born Muslim but who reportedly converted to Christianity. Accad was initially held at Tora Prison, south of Cairo. After a court ordered Accad's release from detention in August 2006, SSIS authorities deliberately ignored the ruling, eventually transferring him to Wadi el-Natroun Prison, located 60 miles north of Cairo along the highway to Alexandria. On April 28, 2007, the authorities released Accad after he had spent almost 2 years in prison without being formally charged with any crime.

The security services reportedly maintain regular and sometimes hostile surveillance of Muslim-born citizens who are suspected of having converted to Christianity. One of these converts also reported that officers from the security service pressured him to serve as an informant.

In May 2006 public prosecutor Maher Abdul Wahid ordered two Azharites, Abdul Sabur al-Kashef and Mohammed Radwan, to be tried by a low-level criminal court on charges of blaspheming Islam. Kashef was prosecuted for claiming to have seen God while Radwan was prosecuted for denying the existence of heaven and hell. Al-Kashef was sentenced to 11 years' imprisonment while Radwan received 3 years. In mid-January 2007 El-Gamaleya Misdemeanor Court of Appeals reduced Kashef's sentence to 6 years' imprisonment and upheld the earlier ruling of 3-years for Radwan.

The law prescribes administrative steps pursuant to the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam. The minor children of converts to Islam, and in some cases adult children, may automatically become classified as Muslims in the eyes of the Government irrespective of the religion of the other spouse. This practice is in accordance with the Government's interpretation of Shari'a, which dictates "no jurisdiction of a non-Muslim over a Muslim."

On April 24, 2007, the Court of Administrative Justice ruled that the Interior Ministry was not obligated to recognize conversion to Christianity by Christian-born converts to Islam. The Court ruled that such recognition would violate the prohibition against apostasy under Shari'a and constitute a "manipulation of Islam and Muslims." This ruling was inconsistent with verdicts issued over the previous 3 years by the same court on behalf of 32 such converts and functioned to support a government policy not to provide a legal means for converts from Islam to Christianity to amend their civil records to reflect their new religious status. In April 2004 an administrative court had issued a verdict allowing Mona Makram Gibran, who had converted to Islam and later converted back to Christianity, to recover her original (Christian) name and identity. Some legal observers hoped the case would constitute a significant precedent as the Government has generally refused to acknowledge citizens' conversions from Islam to Christianity. The court's written verdict noted "...the Constitution guarantees equality among citizens ...without any discrimination based on race, sex, language, or faith. The Government also guarantees freedom of thought and religious faith in accordance with Article 46 of the Constitution.... [The State] is legally committed to register the woman's real religion and is not allowed under any circumstance to use its assigned powers to force the woman to remain Muslim." Building on the precedent of the Gibran case, approximately 30 other citizens successfully sued to recover their Christian identities between 2004 and April 2007. The April 24, 2007 decision, however, appeared to imperil this precedent, although at the end of the reporting period, lawyers for the plaintiffs were appealing it. At the end of the reporting period, there were approximately 200 additional cases pending before the courts involving individuals who had converted to Islam but returned to Christianity, and who were attempting to recover their original Christian identities.

The Government does not recognize conversions of Muslims to Christianity or other religious groups, and resistance to such conversions by local officials constitutes a prohibition in practice. In the absence of a legal means to register their change in religious status, some converts resorted to soliciting illicit identity papers, often by submitting fraudulent supporting documents or bribing the government clerks who process the documents. In such cases, authorities periodically charged converts with violating laws prohibiting the falsification of documents.

Under Shari'a as interpreted by the Government, a non-Muslim wife who converts to Islam must divorce her "apostate," non-Muslim husband. Upon the wife's conversion, local security authorities ask the non-Muslim husband if he is willing to convert to Islam; if he chooses not to, divorce proceedings begin immediately and custody of children is awarded to the mother.

In April 2005 the Family Court granted the divorce of Wafaa Riffat Adly, a Christian woman who had converted to Islam, from her Christian husband, Said Farouk Adly, after he refused to convert.

An estimated several thousand persons were imprisoned because of alleged support for or membership in Islamist groups seeking to overthrow the Government. The Government stated that these persons were in detention because of membership in or activities on behalf of violent extremist groups, without regard to their religious affiliation. Internal security services monitor groups and individuals suspected of involvement in or planning for extremist activity. Internal security agencies regularly detain such persons, and the state of emergency allows them to renew periods of administrative detention ad infinitum.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion carried out by the Government; however, there were again reports of forced conversions of Coptic women and girls to Islam by Muslim men. Reports of such cases are disputed and often include inflammatory allegations and categorical denials of kidnapping and rape. Observers, including human rights groups, find it extremely difficult to determine whether compulsion was used, as most cases involve a female Copt who converts to Islam when she marries a Muslim male. Reports of such cases almost never appear in the local media.

Wafaa Constantin, a Christian woman whose alleged conversion to Islam in December 2004 sparked significant protests in Cairo, remained in seclusion in a Coptic church facility. During the reporting period, the Administrative Judicial Court of the State Council considered a lawsuit filed by Islamist Yusuf al-Badri and 10 attorneys demanding that Wafaa Constantin be handed over to Al-Azhar, on the strength of her declaration that she had embraced Islam. As a Muslim citizen, he argued, the Church has no jurisdiction over her in accordance with Article Two of the Constitution. On April 24, 2007, the State Council ruled that Constantin had chosen to remain Christian. At the end of the reporting period she remained in seclusion in a Church facility.

In February 2007 Muslim citizens set fire to Christian-owned shops in the village of Armant, Qena governorate, after reports of a love affair between a Muslim woman and a Coptic Christian man. Security forces deployed in the town, closed shops under a security decree, and detained eight Muslims and one Copt. Member of Parliament Mohamed al-Nubi and village leaders initiated a national conference on inter-religious dialogue to address the sectarian divide and reportedly brought together some 2,000 Muslims and Christians from across the country.

There are reports of government authorities failing to uphold the law in sensitive conversion cases. Local authorities sometimes allow custody of a minor Christian female who "converts" to Islam to be transferred to a Muslim custodian, who is likely to grant approval for a marriage opposed by the girl's Christian parents. (Although the minimum age for marriage is 18 for both men and women, girls who are at least 16 but not yet 18 may marry if they have the approval of their parents, or, in cases where the girl asserts that she has converted to Islam, with the approval of a Muslim guardian.)

According to the Government's Instructions for Notaries Public, which implement Law 114 of 1947, persons age 16 and above may convert to Islam without parental consent. Christian activists assert that ignorance of the law and social pressure, including the centrality of marriage to a woman's identity, often affect a girl's decision to convert. Family conflict and financial pressure also are cited as factors.

According to *Watani* newspaper editor and publisher, Youssef Sidhom, and Christian lawyer Naguib Gabriel, the reporting period witnessed the apparent cessation of the required religious "advice and guidance sessions" in the case of Christian-born converts to Islam. According to Sidhom, the advice and guidance sessions had proved repeatedly to be instrumental in resolving disputed conversion cases, returning many Christian girls to their original faith and families. Sidhom complained that the decision to annul the advice and guidance sessions was taken by the Interior Ministry without any prior notice or discussion. Gabriel filed a lawsuit before the administrative court to restore the "advice and guidance sessions," but the court issued no judgment by the end of the reporting period.

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who may have been abducted or illegally removed from the United States.

Anti-Semitism

The country's Jewish community numbers 200, most of them senior citizens. Anti-Semitic sentiments appeared in both the government-owned and opposition press; however, there have been no violent anti-Semitic incidents in recent years. Anti-Semitic articles and opinion pieces appeared in the print media, and editorial cartoons appeared in the press and electronic media. Anti-Semitism in the media was common, but less prevalent than in recent years, and anti-Semitic editorial cartoons and articles depicting demonic images of Jews and Israeli leaders, stereotypical images of Jews along with Jewish symbols, and comparisons of Israeli leaders to Hitler and the Nazis were published throughout the year. These expressions occurred primarily in the government-sponsored daily newspapers, *Al-Gumhuriyya*, *Akhbar Al-Yawm*, and *Al-Ahram*, but elicited no government response. For example, on August 7, 2006, in an article in the government-controlled daily newspaper *Al-Ahram*, the Grand Mufti Ali Gom'a criticized recent Israeli military action in Lebanon and wrote that Israeli "lies have exposed the true and hideous face of the blood suckers who...planned [to prepare] a matzo [unleavened Passover bread] using human blood."

On August 24, 2006, a Muslim cleric, Safwat Higazi, appeared on Dream TV to discuss recent media reports that he had issued a ruling (on the Islamic Al-Nas channel) that permitted the killing of Israeli Jews in Egypt. Higazi opined that killing of certain Israeli Jews (specifically adults who are serving in the Israeli Defense Forces reserves) in the country was permissible. On September 13, 2006, *Al-Ahram* published an opinion column entitled "Who is the Nazi Now" and stated that "The war that Hitler led against the Jews was an excuse through which the Zionists justified their colonizing of Palestine ... But the Jews, who escaped from oppression, oppressed the Palestinians... and thus, the victims of the old Nazis became the new Nazis...Who is the Nazi now? Günther Grass, who admitted the mistake he made when he was an adolescent? Or David Ben Gurion, Begin, Shamir, Sharon, Olmert, and people of their kind?"

The Government has advised journalists and cartoonists to avoid anti-Semitism. Government officials insist that anti-Semitic statements in the media are a reaction to Israeli government actions against Palestinians and do not reflect historical anti-Semitism; however, there are few public attempts to distinguish between anti-Semitism and anti-Israeli

sentiment.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

According to the Minister for Awqaf, Hamdy Zaqqouq, in a December 2006 press statement, the Government has appointed 50 women to roles as preachers (murshidat) to address gatherings of Muslim women in mosques, for the first time in the country's history.

A Coptic Christian woman was among 30 women judges appointed to the bench in early April.

Courts have normally not prosecuted officials suspected of responsibility for personal injuries or damages due to sectarian-based violence. However, the Government took positive steps in response to an April 2006 sectarian attack in Alexandria that led to mob violence the following day resulting in injuries to Copts and the burning and looting of Christian-owned shops. A parliamentary inquiry investigated the incidents and in January 2007 a police military tribunal in Cairo convicted 5 of 10 accused police officers on charges of dereliction of duty for failing to appear at their respective duty stations. The court also ratified previous penalties imposed on a group of police captains by an internal police review board, ruling that the captains should be excluded from service in the future. The tribunal also dismissed one brigadier general from service on grounds that he was incapable of performing the duties assigned to him, and fined a colonel and a major \$250 (LE 1500) each. Final rulings had not been handed down against the remaining 5 officers by the end of the reporting period.

During the reporting period Al-Azhar held a small number of interfaith discussions both inside the country and abroad, most of them in connection to the controversy surrounding Pope Benedict XVI's comments on the Prophet Muhammad. The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Tantawi, a government appointee, and Coptic Orthodox Pope Shenouda III, participated in joint public events during Ramadan and Easter and in a Christian-Muslim dialogue in June 2006.

In January 2007 the NCHR released its third annual report, in which it recommended a solution for official recognition of Baha'is, discussed the complaints of Jehovah's Witnesses, and criticized both religious textbooks in schools and the curriculum taught in the Imams' Institution affiliated with the Ministry of Higher Education for failing to address human rights topics. The report also encouraged the Government to pass a law for all religious groups addressing the construction of new places of worship.

An Islamic-Christian conference on September 7, 2006, in Al-Alamein called for the urgent development of religious discourse in order to "entrench nationalism and sense of belonging among all categories of the society." The meeting was organized by the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services (CEOSS) and attended by Islamic and Christian scholars along with university professors, media representatives, and prominent figures. The conference called for rallying efforts to disseminate the moderate religious trends of both Islam and Christianity.

During the reporting period more than 170 political and human rights activists, Muslim and Christian intellectuals, and academics launched an initiative ("Egyptians Against Religious Discrimination") to promote religious tolerance and combat discrimination against non-Muslims. The idea originated in April 2006 after the attacks on Alexandria churches. Their aim is to achieve equal treatment for all citizens and enhance freedom of religion. On March 5, 2007, the movement issued a statement criticizing security service refusal to allow them to hold meetings to discuss Article Two of the Constitution.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Christians and Muslims share a common culture and live as neighbors throughout the country. However, religious tensions exist and individual acts of prejudice and violence occur.

On May 11, 2007, following Friday prayers in the village of Bamha, near Cairo, a group of Muslim citizens attacked Christian villagers, reportedly because they believed that the Christians were planning to build or enlarge a church without having obtained a license. The ensuing violence led to the arson or looting of 27 Christian-owned shops and homes, and injuries to 12 Christians, one seriously. Police responded quickly to contain the violence and detained approximately 60 mostly Muslim villagers. By the end of the reporting period, most detainees had been released, and the local authorities sought to arrange several reconciliation meetings in Bamha but had not pursued formal charges against those responsible for the violence.

In Awlad Azaz village, Sohag governorate, Muslim and Christian villagers clashed on September 16, 2006, over 14.5 acres (14 feddans) of land located outside the formal boundary fence of the Monastery of Saint Shenouda ("the White Monastery"). Although Christians had traditionally claimed the land, local authorities designated a portion of it as a cemetery for Muslims in 2003. After the monk who heads the monastery encouraged Christian villagers to cultivate the land, Muslim protestors used nearby mosque loudspeakers to call upon Muslims to defend the land against Christian

"encroachment." Despite the rapid deployment of security forces in the area, the ensuing clashes resulted in minor injuries. Security officials, members of Parliament, and local officials in the governorate worked quickly to resolve the problem. A SSIS official reportedly brokered a deal that resulted in the land being equally divided between Christians and Muslims.

In a talk show aired by Dream TV in March 2007, noted television personality Mona al-Shazli hosted Muslim judges Magdi al-Garhi and Noha al-Zeini, who expressed their personal objections to Christians being appointed as judges. They asserted that judges are 'patrons' who are charged with authority and that Islam was explicit in rejecting the patronage of non-Muslims over Muslims. A number of Christian judges of the State Council, the highest administrative court in the country, held a meeting at the Judges' Club (a professional association) in which they demanded an apology from Garhi, with some demanding Garhi's resignation as secretary of the club.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Religious freedom is an important part of the bilateral dialogue. The right of religious freedom has been raised with senior government officials by all levels of the U.S. Government, including by visiting members of Congress, the Secretary of State, Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs, the Ambassador, and other State Department and embassy officials. The Embassy maintains formal contacts with the Office of Human Rights at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Embassy also discusses religious freedom issues regularly in contacts with other government officials, including governors and members of Parliament. The Ambassador has made public statements supporting religious freedom, interfaith understanding, and efforts toward harmony and equality among citizens of all religious groups. Specifically, the Embassy and other State Department officials raised concerns with the Government about ongoing discrimination faced by Christians in building and maintaining church properties despite Decree 291 of 2005, official discrimination against Baha'is, and the Government's treatment of Muslim citizens who wish to convert. In addition, the Embassy sent observers to attend court hearings concerning Baha'i efforts to attain identity documents.

The Embassy maintains an active dialogue with leaders of the Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Baha'i religious communities, human rights groups, and other activists. The Embassy investigates complaints of official religious discrimination brought to its attention. It also discusses religious freedom with a range of contacts, including academics, businessmen, and citizens outside of the capital area. U.S. officials actively challenge anti-Semitic articles in the media through discussions with editors-in-chief and journalists.

U.S. programs and activities support initiatives in several areas directly related to religious freedom, including funding for CEOSS programs that work with Coptic community groups in Upper Egypt, as well as support for NGOs that monitor the country's media for occurrences of sectarian bias.

The U.S. Government is working to strengthen civil society, supporting secular channels and the broadening of a civic culture that promotes religious tolerance and supporting projects that promote tolerance and mutual respect between different religious communities.

The Embassy supports the development of educational materials that encourage tolerance, diversity, and understanding of others, in both Arabic-language and English-language curriculums.

The U.S. Government developed a version of the television program *Sesame Street* designed to reach remote households that has as one of its goals the promotion of tolerance, including among different religious groups. According to a recent household survey, the program, begun in 2000, is reaching more than 90 percent of elementary school-aged children.

The Embassy is also working with the Supreme Council of Antiquities to promote the conservation of cultural antiquities, including Islamic, Christian, and Jewish historical sites.

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